

Advance energy conservation

Some optimists are jumping to unfounded conclusions over the welcome drop in U.S. gas prices over the last month, foolishly assuming this decline renders the steep boost earlier this year a mere aberration. Realists know better. And Americans who value not just affordable fuel but strong national defense should know by now that our overdependence on foreign oil imposes costs far beyond sticker shock at the pump.

Reflecting the spreading realization of this long-term problem, and the need to not only produce more energy but conserve more energy, a bipartisan group of senators, including South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham, is backing legislation aimed at saving 2.5 million barrels of oil per day by 2015 and 10 million per day by 2031 (America currently used slightly more than 20 million per day).

Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., put the challenge in stark terms: "Failure to act, we fear, will make America like a pitiful giant, tied down and subject to the whims of small [oil-producing] countries."

The action backed by the senators includes loan guarantees and tax breaks that would motivate automakers to produce - and consumers to purchase - more fuel-efficient vehicles, including gas-electric hybrids and other alternative-energy options.

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., told The Associated Press these proposed measures, which would strengthen the conservation provisions in the energy bill that passed earlier this year, reflect rising awareness driven by that stunning rise in gas prices: "This is just good common sense. This is where the public wants us to go. They want us to not be so dependent on foreign oil. There was a mental sea change in America when gas hit \$3 a gallon."

Though gas is no longer \$3 a gallon (for now), natural-gas prices are far above what they were a year ago. And inexorable supply-and-demand effects on all fossil-fuel costs, particularly the growing oil appetites of China and India, will continue to push prices upward over the long haul. Congress should move forward on this bill to spur more energy conservation.

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